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# SP510 Diversified Urban Plantings

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service

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## Diversified Urban Plantings

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With a little creativity and a well-chosen repertoire of plant materials, there are ways to achieve picturesque and durable urban landscapes. Too often, a city planting consists of a row of the same evergreen trees throughout, or a virtual island of low shrubbery. Though plants for the city may need more careful selection, humdrum landscapes need not be the result.

Some particularly stressful urban sites subject plants to excessive heat, cramped root environments and pollution. One often sees tiny pockets of soil surrounded by concrete or asphalt, where few plant species can survive and thrive. A few tree species that will take these settings surprisingly well in Tennessee are the sweetbay magnolias, the hardier cultivars of crapemyrtle and the fastigiated European hornbeam. These can be underplanted with a ground cover or some tough perennials or shrubs to give more interest.

However, not all sites are so inhospitable. Urban parks and streets with wide boulevards offer opportunities for a great range of plants. There are many advantages to using a mixture of plant materials. For example, if some plants were intolerant of a site for an unforeseen reason, other plants in the design may not be so particular, and fill in

Diverse plantings can offer interest through all four seasons.



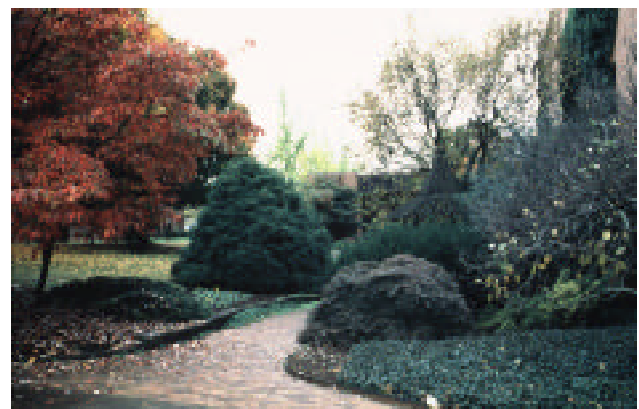
Carol Reese

while a suitable replacement is found. Or, a problem may attack one species of plant and virtually wipe them out, such as the Dutch elm disease that killed the bulk of the American elms. These trees had been a fabulously popular shade tree and were once the most common street tree in the Eastern



Carol Reese

Planters with striking natural form are eye catching in the landscape.



Carol Reese

Planting of contrasting forms and textures.

United States. The decimation of this species taught us not to rely so heavily on one plant species.

Plus, mixing it up is a way to create some intriguing effects. Choose plants for their eye-catching color, visual texture or form, and use these characteristics to create exciting compositions. Try juxtaposing shrubs with striking shapes, such as spikey Mint Julep junipers alongside the softly weeping Thunberg spiraeas. Contrast a lacy, spreading plant such as the Harbor Dwarf nandina against a plant with bold, coarse leaves like oakleaf hydrangea. The same thinking can be applied to herbaceous selections. For example, a shade planting of dark green, finely textured mondo grass would be a great foil for a bold golden hosta such as the cultivar 'Sum and Substance'.

A bed of Rotunda hollies may be durable, but looks basically the same year in and year out. Certainly, evergreen shrubs may be useful to anchor the setting, but you can add plant materials that will create several seasons of interest without sacrificing durability. Spring-blooming shrubs

such as forsythia can light up the planting followed by summer-flowering crapemyrtles. Plants with fall color such as sumac can blaze in, succeeded by colorful winter stems of redbow dogwoods, Japanese maples or kerria. You may enjoy the brilliant red berries of deciduous hollies or cotoneaster contrasted against dark evergreens. Feature the sculptural form of deciduous plants such as the weeping mulberry or the contorted filbert 'Harry Louder's Walking Stick' for even more winter interest.

For herbaceous perennial selections, try spring daffodils followed by the durable Siberian iris. Summer flowers may include Shasta daisies, Blackeyed Susans, alliums and cannas, trailed by fall-blooming hardy chrysanthemums, Autumn Joy sedum and Autumn sage.

Think of city plantings as diverse compositions that can offer much to humans as well as other creatures. Broaden the plant palette! Contrast forms, colors, and textures for urban landscapes that will entertain the eye throughout the seasons.

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## Recommendations


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1. Use a variety of plant materials. Do not rely heavily on one species.
  2. Try to avoid straight lines. Instead try curved, flowing lines. Use natural-looking groups or clusters of plants.
  3. Usually, groups using odd numbers of plants look more pleasant than do groups using even numbers.
  4. Matched, symmetrical plantings generally fail because site differences cause plants to grow at different rates. Use an asymmetrical balanced design.
  5. Consider combining plants with contrasting growth habits and textures rather than using a row of low plants in front of a row of tall ones.
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Appreciation is expressed to Robin Young for design of this publication.

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